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THE EVALUATION OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME „ZERO TOLERANCE FOR VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS”

The „Zero Tolerance for Violence in Schools” programme presented by the government is a project of broad social intervention into the field of educational activity and the functioning of Polish schools. The immediate argument for the introduction of this project was the dramatic and tragic event in one of Gdansk secondary schools that took place in 2006. This event was interpreted as a signal and an indicator of the mass threat of peer violence within Polish schools. Due to this reason, the programme has a broad scope, covering all schools and educational institutions. It is difficult, however, to see the grounds for such an interpretation in the existing research and statistics on aggression at schools, whereas the diagnosis presented in the project is not persuasive enough to justify the introduction of this programme.

The document is not an easy read even for someone interested in the topic. More importantly, it is difficult to overcome the reservations regarding the value of both the diagnosis of the phenomenon of aggression in schools presented in the project, as well as the proposed remedies. Thus, in what follows it is worth raising at least most important concerns regarding the proposed programme.

1. The programme presents a rather vague definition of its subject. The scope of the concepts of “aggression”, “violence”, “safety of students at schools” is not defined precisely. There is a categorisation of violent-aggressive acts and behaviour¹, yet, it is not operationalised for the needs of the programme. What is more, the data² from behaviour studies cited in the project do not have a clear relation with aggression or violence. One may ask if lying to a teacher or drinking are necessarily acts of violence? It is clear that not every student who lied to a teacher or was drunk has to be a violent person. It goes without saying, that such acts are common at school, but they belong to a different category of reprehensible behaviour than aggression, as professor K. Konarzewski showed in his

¹ Suggested by J. Surzykiewicz.

² The date is presented on p. 7 of the project. There is no year of the study given.

empirical study of students' offences³. It is worthwhile mentioning the results of his study, since they might help systematise the understanding of aggressive behaviour at school. Thus, as a results of the analysis of sixteen different types of reprehensible behaviour at school, one can see three categories standing apart:

- **aggression:** beating, bullying and humiliation of fellow students, stealing, extortion of money and belongings, vandalism, spreading gossip about a teacher, rude behaviour towards teachers, threats, pushing a teacher, throwing objects at a teacher;
- **intoxication:** taking drugs, drug dealing, drinking alcohol;
- **insubordination to the norms of the adults' world:** truancy, being late for classes, smoking, not doing homework, spiteful disruption of classes.

To quote professor Konarzewski's conclusion: "the crux of the matter is to distinguish offences being evidence of demoralisation from offences being a normal (although, irritating for us, adults) part of the growing up process. Misbehaviour problems characteristic of secondary schools (gymnasiums) mainly belong to the latter category⁴". The lack of such distinction between different types of reprehensible behaviour is an important weakness of the conception of this programme.

2. Persuasive language dominates the presentation and justification of the programme's aims and assumptions. The use of such terms as "common" (or "massive") with regard to acts of violence and aggression with the whole Polish society as well as the students' community is a systematic exaggeration. Such language presents and consolidates the image of the world that is threatening, full of pathologies and omnipresent evil in the public awareness. It creates a social climate of fear and suspiciousness instead of a climate of calm, open debate on the solving of **serious, but not common** problems connected with aggressive behaviour of some students in and outside school.

3. The persuasive language is coupled with **a rather careless presentation of data regarding the reasons, scope and types of aggression among young people** studying at different types of schools. For a specialist, the data presented in the project seem to be arbitrarily selected, unconvincing and unthorough. At the same time, for a non-specialist the same data can be very misleading, since they present fundamental social institutions – such as schools and the media – as the sources of evil and demoralisation of young people.

A careful reading of the point II of the project, entitled: "the Diagnosis of the Problem of Aggression and Violence within the School Community" as well as point III, entitled: "Characteristic Features of the Aggression and Violence Phenomenon" provides a clear illustration of the project's incoherent and poorly documented presentation of the situation regarding aggression, violence and safety in Polish schools.

³ K. Konarzewski, *Kształcenie i wychowanie w szkołach podstawowych i gimnazjach w roku szkolnym 2002/2003 (Education of children in primary and secondary schools in 2002/2003 academic year)*, the IPA, Warsaw, 2004, pp. 41-47.

⁴ K. Konarzewski, *ibid*, p. 73.

4. The question arises whether the therapy based on unthorough and erroneous diagnosis can be effective? The obvious answer is: no. This weakness cannot be solved either by a big number of recommendations regarding different fields of activity, or a broadly planned correlation of the programme with other government programmes and strategies, or even guaranteeing financial instruments for its implementation. The project is dominated by institutional-legalistic understanding of violence and aggression in Polish schools. The bureaucratic nature of the project would not have been its obvious weakness if the project had been well grounded in socio-economic and cultural models and studies of these phenomena in the social sciences. Unfortunately this is not the case. The authors of the project do not take into account such important factors pertaining to school as: the level of integration of the school community, the state of students' self-government and the quality of the student-teacher relations (especially the student-orientedness of the teacher⁵). National and international research shows the significant impact of these factors on a school's success in the fulfilment of its didactic and educational tasks⁶.

5. The project does not take into account the huge diversity of Polish schools with regard to the quality of implemented educational and didactic strategies and activities. Today we know really a lot about good and bad Polish schools. Such a programme should have addressed the **development of new instruments** (since the existing ones are insufficient or ineffective) in order to support institutions of mediocre educational effects. To give an example, the planned strengthening and broadening of the scope of the specialist psychological and pedagogical assistance should not exclusively take the form of the increased saturation of educational institutions with psychologists and educationalists⁷. It should, first of all, suggest new forms of their work, as well as ensure that every school has access to such specialists in the numbers adequate to its needs so that it could cope with its own educational problems. The implementation of the project's aim to broaden the scope of educational and psychological assistance would demand new and more active forms of cooperation that are different from the existing models of either a medical centre or individual duty shifts of educationalists or psychologists at schools. These new forms of activity would demand substantial and not bureaucratic monitoring to enable easy adjustment to schools' needs as well as dealing with their limitations. Such monitoring should be implemented by independent specialists and institutions specialising in educational programmes' evaluations (universities, think tanks, non-governmental organisations).

⁵ The international PISA study defined it via such indicators as providing help and support to students, being interested in students' problems, readiness to listen to students.

⁶ See international report "Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003", K. Konarzewski, *Kształcenie i wychowanie w szkołach podstawowych i gimnazjach w roku szkolnym 2002/2003* (*Education of children in primary and secondary schools in 2002/2003 academic year*), the IPA: Warsaw, 2004.

⁷ It is written in the project that according to the SIO (Educational Information System of the Ministry of Education) data from 15 September 2006 there were educationalists employed in almost every second secondary school (*gimnasium* and *liceum*), and psychologists in 7,7% of gymnasiums, 5,6% *liceums*, 4,3% primary schools.

6. The emphasis on legal and administrative⁸ instruments in the project arouses fears that the role of other social actors would remain marginal, limited to that of a “client”, a recipient of educational administration’s activities on different levels (supervision, intervention⁹, training).

It is often forgotten that behaviour of people (be it teachers, students or parents) is determined by the values, traditions and behaviour patterns originating in different social environments and its change demands wise and coherent cooperation. Yet, the ministerial project treats us all: teachers, parents, educational activists, students, alike – as “patients” needing diagnosis and treatment, and not active partners seeking solutions to the problem of school aggression. With regard to the proposed legal amendments necessary for the implementation of the programme, the project does not try to make the position of parents and students more significant either in the school system or in this particular programme. To give an example, the proposed changes concern Parents’ Councils that commonly exist in schools, yet the new definition of their competences does not differ much from the present practice. While educational programmes are usually consulted with parent representatives, the change would be that these programmes would be adopted with the participation of the Pedagogical Council. The position of the students’ representatives, at least with regard to the school’s educational programme (including prevention measures) is not taken into account at all.

7. Due to their **obligatory** implementation in all schools, many of the proposed activities in the programme appear to be of dubious value as an effective way of decreasing aggression and increasing safety in schools. Examples include the proposals of school uniforms, camera monitoring, or a whole bloc of proposals regarding the development of extracurricular activities. As regards the uniform, the obligatory nature of it starting from the 1st of September 2007 destroys the spontaneity and freedom of the debate on school uniforms, and as a results, makes the school community integration more difficult. In the case of monitoring, schools’ specific situations have not been taken into account, for example, camera monitoring for small schools, school communities with high social control (e.g. village schools) is neither necessary not most effective from the educational point of view.

8. The extended part on extra-curricular activities as a way of aggression prevention among students also raises many doubts. This part does not contain any information on cooperation or consultation with parents and students on this matter. Whereas, the study conducted in 2001/2002 academic year in secondary schools shows how unattractive extracurricular activities are for students. The most popular reason of not attending extracurricular classes given by students (about 60%) was that schools did not offer activities interesting for the them¹⁰.

⁸ Such instruments, if well formulated, are very important since they support the development of institutions (especially new ones).

⁹ It is said in the project that in 2007-2008 the majority of intervention actions will be implemented.

¹⁰ K. E. Siellawa-Kolbowska, *Praca wychowawca w drugim roku działalności gimnazjów*, w: *Zmiany w systemie oświaty. Wyniki badań empirycznych*, (“Educational work in the second year of gymnasiums’ activity” in *The Reform of the System of Education. Research results*) the IPA, Warsaw, 2002, p. 194.

9. The proposed monitoring and evaluation procedures of such a complex programme are also not very convincing. Most procedures would be just regular reporting on the part of the actors involved in the implementation of the programme on different levels: school directors, educational supervisors, Ministry of Education. Independent evaluation studies would be conducted in 2007 and 2010, although the programme is planned for 2007-2013. These studies are planned as national representative studies which means they would provide only nationwide data regarding the implementation of the programme. In this way, it would be possible to evaluate the dynamics of aggression and violence in schools after the three years of programme implementation. Yet, it seems only reasonable not only to have nationwide studies and analyses, but also a two-tier specific studies. The first tier studies should analyse the effectiveness of the implemented instruments in educational institutions working in difficult social environment. The second tier studies should focus on the analysis of particular instruments and aggression prevention programmes at school. The aim of such studies – in contrast to quantitative nationwide studies – would be qualitative indicators of the effectiveness of selected strategies proposed in the programme.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposed government project, “Zero Tolerance for Violence in Schools”, does not help build the credibility of the Polish educational policy. Educational policy should be designed and implemented disregarding party cleavages and focused on wise and coherent improvement of the 1999 structural and programme reforms of the Polish education system. It would be neither wise nor possible to have a centrally controlled system that would supervise activities in every school. It rather is necessary to:

- supervise wisely, i.e. to use right benchmarks for the evaluation of achievements of particular schools;
- reward schools for their achievements;
- ensure thorough observation of educational results (external representative evaluation studies);
- support research in the field of innovative didactic and educational methods and their implementation into the school practice.

The most necessary changes to the government project should include:

- providing the definition of the subject of the programme, and thus, phenomena connected with it more precise, and adjust the proposed instruments to it;
- taking into account the socio-cultural diversity of school communities;
- ensuring that different social partners (first of all, teachers, parents and students) have real and broad autonomy in the implementation of the didactic and educational aims of a school.

The proposed government project demands rigorous editing. The more than 50-page-long document is simply **reader-unfriendly**¹¹. Its bad-editing gives an impression of being a compilation of many works of different nature: expert, official, scientific, legal. The fact that the document has been made public on the Ministry of Education website and sent to 165 institutions gives an impression of the authors' neglectful attitude to the target audience, and what follows, of the façade mode of public consultations.

¹¹ 53 single-spaced pages to be exact.